

Kenneth returns from speech lessons to Rodgers' 2nd-grade class. The tenor of the class shifts. A slight rumble of discord replaces the chatter of children constructing a picture graph.

Kenneth, not his real name, is the most recent of eight new students in Rodgers' class this school year. Kenneth rarely follows school rules and is functioning below grade level, Rodgers says. His classmates know this and give him grief. Little shoves are sent his way, to which he responds by glaring at the tallest kid in class.

He stands out, Rodgers says. Kenneth is the only student not wearing the school's blue and white uniform.

"My students are starting to write paragraphs, and he can't write a sentence," Rodgers says. "I don't have time to work with him."

"I move quicker," Rodgers says. "I'm a 25-year teacher. He had a first-year teacher."

Students like Kenneth are in danger of failing. A 1994 General Accounting Office report on mobility said 3rd-graders who have changed schools frequently are 2½ times as likely to repeat a grade as 3rd-graders who have never changed schools.

A CATALYST analysis of mobility in Cleveland schools also showed a link between mobility and retention.

The analysis also showed average proficiency test scores of mobile students are about 5 points below scores of stable students.

Janice Smallwood's 4th-grade class at Miles Park has 24 students. Seven are new. When Smallwood tested reading and math levels, students scored between 4.66 and 1.68. Six of the mobile students are at the bottom of the list, scoring below those labeled Learning Disabled. Tianna scored 3.84, the highest of all new students, to rank 11th in the class.

#### BAD BEHAVIOR

Behavior is high on the list of areas affected by mobility. The GAO report said that children who move frequently are 77 percent more likely to have four or more behavioral problems than those with no or infrequent moves.

This constant movement, loss of friends and the effort it takes to make new ones can be "a social nightmare," says Ted Feinberg, assistant executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists.

Some mobile students are content to quietly scope out the class before inserting themselves into the mix. Some use humor to cope, Feinberg explains. The antics of a 4th-grader who had attended about five schools constantly pulled the class off task, says Miles Park teacher Teresa Goetz. She telephoned the boy's previous school to get his history and found that he had jumped on one child's out-stretched leg, breaking it. In November, the boy transferred to another school.

A move from family to foster care sent a Cleveland student to Hawthorne Elementary School in Lorain. This boy was so desperate to make friends, he stole money from a teacher's purse and passed it out to fellow students, Hawthorne Principal Loretta Jones says.

"What we see are kids who are depressed because they don't have a social network," Feinberg says. "Kids feel awkward and uncomfortable. They try to prove themselves through strength and coolness."

#### NO RECORDS

In addition to behavioral and academic problems, mobile students frustrate administrators because the children seldom arrive with records, grades and immunization forms.

Clerk Ella Kirtley spends half her day enrolling new students, withdrawing them and searching for records from their old schools.

Kirtley is retired but Bauer has convinced her to stay on because he doesn't think he can find another clerk who can keep up.

What's scary to Kirtley is how difficult it is to get vital information on students and now quickly that information changes.

Addresses change, telephone numbers change and pagers are cut off so frequently that "You can't be up to date with emergency cards," Principal Bauer says. Sick children have been sent back to class because the school could not find an emergency contact Kirtley says.

#### TESTING MOBILE STUDENTS

Neither Cleveland schools nor the Ohio Department of Education have official strategies to mitigate the impact of mobility. Academic standards are surfacing as a way to be sure all kids are exposed to the same information and tests even though they change schools. (See story page 9.) The state department also plans to create a system of exchanging student records using Education Management Information Systems. The system should be completed in two years, says department spokeswoman Dorothea Howe.

But for the most part, teachers and principals individually hammer out solutions. Some start by finding out the student's performance level so they can be placed in the appropriate class. This is an informal process at most schools.

For example, at Willow Elementary School, Tannesha Saunders' 4th-grade teacher casually quizzed her when she joined the class in October.

"I think she wanted to see what I knew," says Tannesha, who attended four schools in three years. "She'd teach some stuff then she'd ask some people some questions. Then she'd ask me a question and I answered it."

Tannesha says the teacher also gave her a buddy, "Brittany, to help me with my work and show me around like where the lunch-room was."

Testing for placement of new students is serious business at Miles Park. New students are given the Star Test for reading and Computer Curriculum Corp. math, says Miles Park's Assistant Principal Kelley A. Dudley. Both tests assign a grade equivalent based on the student's score and prescribe what students should study to close any achievement gaps, Dudley says.

Star Test scores correspond with grade-appropriate books in Accelerated Reader. Computer Curriculum aligns math with grade levels and allows students to work on problems during math lab and after school. Students work independently or get tutoring from retired professionals who volunteer.

Paris, a new student in Smallwood's 4th-grade class, moved up a grade level to 3.6, Dudley says. "He's still behind, but look where he came from," she says.

#### MANAGING MOBILITY

(By Sandra Clark)

##### THE CAUSES: POVERTY AND FAMILY BREAK-UPS

Miles Park Principal William J. Bauer and other heads of Cleveland elementary schools that experience mobility can only guess why students frequently transfer in and out of their schools.

In most cases, the district does not keep records on why students are withdrawn from school.

School leaders point to income and family instability as primary culprits. Loss of income often means families must move from their houses or apartments. Changes in child custody or guardianship also can cause movement. Some children transfer schools after being placed in foster care.

Then there's homelessness. For example, Kentucky and Case elementary schools serve

students in nearby homeless and battered women's shelters.

Families living at the Zelma George Homeless Shelter attend Miles Park, A.B. Hart Middle and South High School. Families can stay only 14 days unless they receive an extension from the shelter, shelter officials say. (See story page 12.)

Welfare reform also plays an increasingly important role in homelessness and school instability. Mobility for families recently cut from welfare is four times higher than that of other families, reports Claudia Coulton, social welfare professor at Case's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences. About 42 percent of Cuyahoga County families leaving welfare moved within six-months of leaving cash assistance, compared to the national average of 8 percent of families not on welfare moving during the period, Coulton says.

That's not entirely bad news. Many parents now have jobs and can afford to move to better neighborhoods, says Rasool Jackson, Cleveland school's director of Student Administrative Services.

Bauer disagrees, saying welfare reform portends more instability. Bauer says he believes more Miles Park students are losing their homes and moving in with family members since welfare reform took hold.

Another major cause of movement is discomfort with the school. For example, results of a survey of students in Chicago Public Schools showed one reason students transferred was school-related, not that the family changed homes, says David Kerbow, education researcher at the University of Chicago. When conflict with school staff or students occurred, parents chose to leave rather than solve the problem, Kerbow explains.

Margaret V. Alberty was so uncomfortable with teachers handling of her special-needs 4th-grader that she changed schools six times before settling on Willow Elementary School.

Alberty is guardian of 10-year-old Damien Lightfoot, who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Alberty says many teachers are unprepared to teach a child with his condition and do not know how to handle Damien when he's upset. He's been grabbed and jerked about by teachers, Alberty says. "They aggravate you so much you have to take them out of the school."

It's not unusual for parents like Alberty to change schools because they disagree with a school's academic practices or front-office manners. "A rude clerk can really damage your school," says Doug Clay, a former district researcher now with the Urban School Collaborative at Cleveland State University.

Finally, Peter A. Robertson, Cleveland Municipal School's executive director of Research, Evaluation and Assessment, says a number of Cleveland students transfer to escape poor grades or a special education diagnosis.

Districts and communities across the country are using a variety of strategies to lessen the negative effects of mobility or to limit mobility itself. Some schools have created programs to welcome students and place them in the most suitable classroom. Others go outside the school walls to address housing issues. Here is a list of tactics principals, districts and states have used to manage mobility.

#### PLACING NEW STUDENTS

When Jo Ann Isken, principal of Moffett Elementary School in Los Angeles County, learned about a kindergartner who was having trouble learning to read, she did a little checking. She found he had attended three different schools, with lengthy absences in